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RHETORICAL SMOKE WITHOUT REVOLUTIONARY FIRE

A Study of the Consciousness
of the
New Zealand Waterside Workers Federation
1915 - 1937

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology at Massey University

by

Vivienne Magda Porzsolt

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has two purposes. The first is to establish a tool for a Marxist analysis of trade union consciousness; the second is to demonstrate it in action in a case study of the New Zealand Waterside Workers Federation (NZWWF) from 1915 - 1937. Basing itself on the work of the classic Marxist revolutionary theorists, (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Lukacs and Gramsci), a Marxist typology of essential revolutionary concepts is constructed. This is designed to assess the degree of revolutionary consciousness of any particular union, that is, the degree to which it struggles against bourgeois constraints or, on the contrary, the degree to which it succumbs.

A multi-factorial, bi-polar typology is then built up from basic Marxist concepts with particular reference to trade unions and their role under capitalism and this typology is used to analyse the consciousness of the watersiders. This analysis includes both a study of the historical constraints facing them and a detailed study of their responses. The historical constraints are the economic, political and ideological forces confronting the trade union movement as a whole 1915-1937, together with an account of the development of the trade union movement within these constraints. The role of the transport workers and the watersiders within the wider union movement is described.

The typology is then applied to the contents of the Federation newspaper, the Transport Worker, (TW), and the decisions of the

Federation as recorded in the Minutes of its Annual (later Biennial) Conferences from 1915-1937. The actions and ideas of the Federation are discussed according to periods set by the economic and political conditions external to the union: Boom, 1915-1921; Stagnation 1922-1929; Depression, 1930-1934; Labour Government, 1935-1937. The Federation shows a development from a syndicalist, though not militant, position to one leaning heavily on political action through the parliamentary Labour Party.

PREFACE

This thesis emerges from questions which became urgent for me to answer during my work as a rank-and-file trade unionist. On the one hand, most of us with socialist goals were working in the trade union movement in the belief that these working class organisations had something to do with the attainment of those goals. On the other hand, there were considerable obstacles to this, not only of an objective kind, but in the minds of our fellow workers. What were the forces which created attitudes in workers which led them often to collude in their own exploitation? What sort of ideas and aims would they need to enable them to resist capitalist exploitation and domination? This thesis does not attempt to answer the question 'Why no revolutionary consciousness?', but seeks simply to establish the nature of the kind of consciousness which would need to be an aspect of revolutionary practice. By measuring such a profile of revolutionary consciousness against the concepts embedded in the actual words and actions of a leading trade union in a significant period of New Zealand history, the nature of the apprent lack of revolutionary consciousness in a New Zealand union can be illustrated. The exercise, then, is one of identifying an absence. No attempt is made to theorise this absence in sociological terms. However, it is of considerable practical value for socialist activists to clarify the nature of revolutionary consciousness, on the one hand, and the nature of its absence at a particular historical conjuncture on the other.

ABBREVIATIONS

All references in the text are abbreviated thus:

AJHR,H.11,1931:131	Annual Report of the Department of Labour <u>Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives</u> ,1931,p131.
NZC	<u>New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings</u>
NZYOB	<u>New Zealand Official Yearbook</u>
RP,B23/1:2Dec1933	Roberts Papers,B23/1, 2nd December, 1933.
RP,B43/12,1931:5	Roberts Papers,B43/12,p5.
WS,Aug1916:1.	<u>New Zealand Watersider</u> , August 1916, p1.
TW,Oct1933:14	<u>New Zealand Transport Worker</u> , October 1933, p14.

Note: Official Government Publications are listed in the bibliography
under the most recent title of department and publication.

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Lastly, I acknowledge two broad sources of inspiration for this thesis.

My colleagues and fellow workers in the trade union movement taught me solidarity in class struggle and the unity of theory and practice. The theory developed in this thesis in part springs from, and hopefully informs, that practice.

My parents, Gerda and Imrich Porsolt, bequeathed to me a rich cultural tradition which Isaac Deutscher has called that of the non-Jewish Jew - critical, rational, internationalist. While I have diverged considerably in my life from the path they chose, I have followed in their footsteps more closely than may be apparent. To them I dedicate this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis has a two-fold purpose, firstly, to construct a tool, a typology, for the analysis of trade union consciousness and, secondly, to apply it in a case study of the New Zealand Waterside Workers Federation from 1915 to 1937.

Class consciousness is a significant force in historical development. Key questions for a Marxist understanding of New Zealand history are: Why is there so little revolutionary working class consciousness in New Zealand? What is the nature of the consciousness which does exist? But before the sources of working class consciousness can be explored, it is necessary to identify the exact nature of its content. Only when we have identified the phenomenon we seek to explain can we begin to ask the question 'How come?' This thesis seeks to establish a framework to assist such identification and description. In addressing the issue of class consciousness, it is hoped to make some contribution to the broader analysis of class in New Zealand.

At present, these questions remain unilluminated because of the lack of historical research prompted by them. Class, in the Marxist sense, has been so consistently denied, confused or underplayed in New Zealand historiography, that research, Marxist or otherwise, which would make it possible to begin to examine such a question is simply not available. As Campbell has pointed out, the debates between Oliver(1969), Olssen(1974) and Sinclair(1965) show an

inadequate conceptualisation of class from a Marxist point of view(Campbell,1977:62). The blind spot in New Zealand historiography concerning class is just one expression of the lack of class consciousness in general. In particular, the history of the working class and its organisations has been neglected. The Labour Party has been studied, not as a working class party, but as, what in fact it became, a 'classless' agency of general social betterment. There has been only one brief general history, (Roth,1973b) of New Zealand trade unions published, with a few histories of individual unions, (Pettit,1948; Bollinger,1968; Campbell,1976; Roth,1973a;1977;1984; Norris,1984). It is no accident that most of these are accounts of the transport workers' unions.

It is ironic that this lacuna of New Zealand historians as regards class has begun to be remedied by those working in other disciplines - geography, economics, political science and, in particular, sociology. Armstrong(1978), Bedggood(1980), Jesson(1981), Martin(1981), Walsh(1981), Steven((1985), Gallagher and Swainson(1985) are among those who have begun to reinterpret in the light of a class analysis the material researched by historians. Sociological theory offers a powerful means of illuminating New Zealand historical development in terms of the class forces which shaped it. However, much more historical data is still required to inform and extend such work.

These historical questions are important for socialists as well as for sociologists because the answers offer a guide for strategy and

practice; they help decide 'What is to be done?'. The focus of this thesis is essentially practical; through a piece of historically-grounded and sociologically-informed research, which extends a Marxist sociological analysis of New Zealand history, it is hoped to make one small contribution to the political task of achieving socialism in New Zealand.

One important working class agency for the constitution of working class consciousness is the trade union movement. Moss has pointed out that:

'Contrary to the view that sees trade unions as adaptive or reactive organisations, they play a formative role in the creation of a working class...Their policies...weld the bonds and shape the consciousness of the working class,' (Moss, 1984:238).

Parkin has noted that trade union membership is a significant factor in enabling workers to resist bourgeois ideology, what he calls the dominant value system (Parkin, 1967:284). Trade unions are probably even more important in New Zealand in this respect since the stable working class communities, which are an alternative source noted by Parkin of this capacity to resist, have been largely lacking. The study of trade union consciousness is therefore an important aspect of the study of working class consciousness in the wider sense.

One problem with existing discussions of trade union history that do exist is that they concentrate on great events in which trade union militancy was displayed - 1890, 1913, 1951. These struggles are

mythologised in trade union tradition. It is too often forgotten that these were also major defeats which involved only a minority of the trade union movement. At its height in 1912, the Red Federation of Labour represented 15,000 members while the Trades and Labour Councils represented 52,000, (Roth, 1973:33). The state repression and economic collapse of the 1920's and 30's which reduced wages and hamstrung union organisation, must be seen as a landmark in trade union history of equal significance to the three defeats noted above; in fact, the defeat of the 20's and 30's could be seen as more significant, since it affected every worker, employed or unemployed. But because this defeat did not take the form of one cataclysmic collective struggle, its significance as an event in trade union history is ignored by historians, working class and bourgeois alike.

Within the constraints set for it by bourgeois power, the working class continues to 'make itself' in times of acquiescence quite as much as in times of militancy. It is as, or even more, important to study its processes in the times when it fails to challenge bourgeois exploitation and oppression as on the occasions when it does do so. For this reason, the 1920's and 30's is a significant period in the history of the New Zealand trade union movement, but because its significance has been overlooked, it is even less studied from a working class point-of-view than most others. This thesis therefore draws its case study from this period.

Another interpretation that needs examination is the traditional distinction in New Zealand labour historiography between 'right-wing'

so-called moderates and 'left-wing' so-called militants. It is a moot point how much the militant/conservative split was an ideological one and how much a tactical one based on differing positions in the economic structure. While clearly revolutionary political aims did emerge, as with the Red Federation, this was not always so with those that took militant action. The objects of the Maritime Council were restricted to 'legitimate and necessary reforms', (Roth,1973:13). And the Trades and Labour Councils at times espoused socialist aims. This was so with the United Federation of Labour before the 1913 Waterfront strike, which still retained the Industrial Workers of the World preamble and a controversial strike clause. All but a tiny minority of the trade unions subscribed to this constitution. The contrasting conditions of the various occupational groups offered widely differing possibilities for successful action and the apparent differences in militancy must not necessarily be interpreted as basic ideological differences. Two unpublished studies on the Trades and Labour Councils 1891-1911, (Mills,1977) and on the printing unions in the 1920's and 30's (Porzsolt,1983) already bring into question the militant/moderate distinction in historical terms. More historical study is needed to test this traditional view. Therefore in choosing a union to take as a case study, it is useful to examine the nature of the consciousness of a reputedly militant, left-wing union: the watersiders.

Jesson (1981a) has noted the theoretical confusion between trade union militancy and revolutionary impulses in New Zealand

historiography. In fact, Jesson sees militancy as having a comparable role to the welfare state in integrating the working class under capitalist hegemony. In achieving bread and butter objectives, even with undoubted vigour and class struggle, the working class, Jesson claims, is more firmly maintained within the confines of the system which militant unionism of itself fails to challenge. While Jesson's point is overstated, it does spotlight the need to demythologise militancy. This ambiguity of militancy, in fact, implies the necessity, in a Marxist analysis of consciousness, of distinguishing between an authentic revolutionary Marxist position and a merely militant, reformist one.

The watersiders are interesting for two reasons. They took a leading role in the 1920's and 30's in the formation and direction of the Alliance of Labour, the self-styled militant wing of the trade union movement in the period. A study of their consciousness therefore should throw some light on that of the wider industrial labour movement in the period.

The watersiders are generally reputed to be on the left of the political spectrum - for right wingers, red wreckers and Bolsheviks, for left wingers, progressive or militant. It is important to examine the exact nature of their political position and to what extent it was truly revolutionary.

While some historians have studied class consciousness in other parts of the world from a more or less Marxist perspective, they have done

it largely in an intuitive manner, with little definition in theoretical terms of what it is they mean. For instance, in his formidable work Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution, Foster, hinges his complex argument on evidence of militancy which has the aim of 'a total change of the social system', (Foster, 1974:74). Even granting the 'difficulty of defining something whose ideological content is always historically relative and specific,' (ibid:73), this is not sufficiently specific from a Marxist point of view.

Rothstein has clearer implicit ideas of what constitutes what he calls proletarian class consciousness. This is basically the understanding that the proletariat must rely on its own efforts to achieve change and have 'the resolve not to shrink from the most extreme measures,' (Rothstein, 1983:49). This implies, firstly, that the proletariat relies on independent structures of its own, structures not dominated by bourgeois power - in other words, that it is a subject in its own history. Secondly, it implies uncompromising class struggle.

Moss in his study of the three major trade union confederations in France offers a useful analysis of the different political and ideological strategies which they adopt (Moss, 1984). However, this too is an historical study and from a sociological point of view, something more systematic is needed for a precise analysis of revolutionary class consciousness.

This thesis proposes a development from these contributions. Taking a sociological approach, it will set down in a systematic manner concepts which must underlie the practices of a trade union if it is to be said to have a truly revolutionary consciousness in the Marxist sense. It does not seek to typologise empirical words and actions which are always determined by their historical context. In this way it is hoped to surmount the difficulty noted by Foster of 'defining something whose ideological content is always historically relative'. While the typology is theoretical, its application to union words and actions will rely strongly on analysis of the historical forces in which it operates. The emphasis will be on analysing the nature of a union's practices, the degree to which it engages in class struggle and the kinds of strategies it adopts. Thus while the primary purpose of the thesis is to describe the consciousness of a trade union, this inevitably means consideration of the material basis in terms of the historical constraints. However, there will be no attempt to theorise these beyond the basic materialist premise that all consciousness is a product of material historical existence.

The theoretical chapter has two purposes. It seeks to establish a materialist concept of consciousness. It is necessary to be quite clear exactly what it is we seek to analyse and describe. It is equally necessary to be clear about the role of trade unions in capitalist society, their limits and potential for revolutionary action. The basic concepts of the typology will be drawn from the classic Marxist theorists (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Lukacs and Gramsci) and their theories of the nature of the

capitalist mode of production and of revolutionary strategies to overthrow it. Much current neo-Marxist sociological theory has moved a considerable distance from the materialist basis set by these classical writers, who, with the exception of Gramsci, have suffered neglect. The classical writers are differentiated from neo-Marxist theorists by their engagement in revolutionary practice. Their ideas were forged in the fire of that practice and have all, to a greater or lesser extent, been taken over or used by subsequent revolutionary movements. These ideas have thus taken on a material reality by being absorbed and enacted by historically significant agencies. 'Ideas become a material force in history when they seize the minds of the masses,'. Their theory grew out of their practice and in turn developed that practice. As Anderson says:

'The international disputes which united and divided Luxemburg, Lenin, Lukacs, Gramsci or Trotsky...represent the last great strategic debate in the European workers' movement. Since then, there has been little significant theoretical development of the political problems of revolutionary strategy in metropolitan capitalism that has had any direct contact with the masses,' (Anderson, 1976/77:78).

It is this firm link between the practice and theory of these writers that gives their work a sound materialist basis. Their theory is materialist both in its origins and its effects. Since this thesis addresses the essentially practical question, 'What is to be Done?', it is important that its theoretical framework has a sound basis in practice. A return to these classical revolutionary theorists offers a timely renewal of a truly materialist approach.

The next chapter will construct the analytical framework to describe trade union consciousness. It will take the form of a multi-dimensional bi-polar typology. That is, it will establish a whole range of concepts considered basic to a Marxist position to form one pole and their opposing bourgeois concepts to form the other pole. Each pole of the typology will therefore consist of a number of dimensions and the typology thus offers complexity combined with flexibility. The aim is to build an analytical tool which will expose the degree to which a trade union struggles and opposes the constraints in which it is situated, its degree of 'resolve' in Rothstein's sense.

Having set the theoretical framework, we will then move on to outline the historical conjuncture in which the New Zealand Waterside Workers Federation was situated 1915-1937 with reference to the economic, political and ideological forces with which the trade union movement had to grapple. Then we will trace its internal development with a focus on the NZ Watersiders' Federation and the transport unions.

Then follows the empirical core of the thesis - the application of the typology to the words and actions of the NZWWF 1915-1937. The Transport Worker and the minutes of the Annual (later Biennial) Conferences of the NZWWF form the selected data base. The consciousness exhibited by the Federation will then be analysed and discussed within the context of four sub-periods of the period 1915-1937 defined by economic and political conditions external to the Federation. These periods are War Boom 1915-1921; Stagnation

1922-1929; Depression 1930-1934 and Labour Government 1935-1937.

This approach aims to highlight the constraints within which trade unions under capitalism function. The task of the thesis is thus to establish the nature of the economic, political and ideological forces at work within New Zealand 1915-1937 and then use the typology to assess and identify the nature of the practices engaged in by the New Zealand Waterside Workers' Federation within that set of historical forces.

Ideally, from a historical point of view, it would have been desirable to follow up other material such as correspondence, awards, shipping company records and newspapers to gain a fuller assessment of the events which impinged on the watersiders. However, this is a sociological study and the emphasis has been on sociological analysis. Secondary material such as Pettit

(1948), Norris (1984) and Townsend (1985) has been used where appropriate. This thesis, therefore, makes no claim to be a history. Its main purpose is to explore the revolutionary potential of trade unions, and to clarify the problems involved in examining trade union consciousness. By applying the framework derived from this discussion in a preliminary way to one leading trade union in a neglected period of New Zealand labour history, it is hoped that that history may be to some degree illuminated.